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Features

Life as an academic 'Tiger'

DIARY OF A FULBRIGHTER

By Zul-Fakhri Maidy in Columbia, Missouri



Islamic Centre of Central Missouri just two blocks away from the lecture hall.



The writer pictured sitting in front of the Tiger monument. - PHOTOS: ZUL-FAKHRI MAIDY



Jesse Hall at the heart of the university.



A department building on campus.



A well-stocked Eastern food store.



Front page of The Missouriian's Wednesday edition.



Newsroom of the Columbia Missouriian daily newspaper.

In the midst of soaking up the atmosphere in my first few weeks, it was hard not to notice how warm and friendly the townspeople were where I had only recently moved in.

After all, Columbia is widely known throughout the Midwestern state of Missouri as a 'college town', meaning that members of the local community have over the past century grown so accustomed to seeing fresh new faces from all around the world.

The experience of entering a room full of Journalism 'grad students' for the first time on August 6, 2007 was both as humbling as it was uplifting. One can be forgiven for feeling daunted by the overwhelming number of enthusiastic American students interacting with one another just before the start of class.

But at the same time I felt a strong sense of pride that I had come from thousands of miles away to be the sole and first-ever representative of my beloved country at the University of Missouri-Columbia, one of the world's finest institutions for Journalism studies.

The students at Mizzou, as the university is called, are generally seen as being highly competitive and determined, yet hugely supportive of one another.

It therefore comes as no surprise that the official symbol of the university is the tiger, and that every Mizzou student is regarded as possessing the same high-spirited qualities of the predatory big cat.

By the end of the first lecture session, I was convinced that the only overwhelming quantity was the amount of information provided in such a short space of time. The lecturers that stood before me and my new classmates had trained some of the world's leading journalists of today.

Some of them are simply living legends in the field. To name but one, Stuart Loory, our International Media Systems lecturer, joined Turner Broadcasting Systems' Cable News Network in 1980 and was the Vice-President of CNN between 1990 and 1995.

Cristiane Amanpour was said to be one of his trainees. Such is the quality of the world's first school of journalism.

What struck me most on the first day was how casual the lecturers were - both in their demeanour and in the way they dressed. But they really knew their stuff inside out. They were all absolutely well spoken and carried an air of journalistic flair and gusto.

There is no shortage of guts and glory here. Students who fail to step up to the

frontline of active participation will find themselves lost and forgotten in swampy no-man's land. Classroom participation is not just a 'plus' in American colleges, but a 'must', and is a direct factor in overall grading.

For most of us, this active approach to studying took some weeks of getting used to. Fortunately for me, all my explanations, opinions and views have been well accepted, and I am determined to keep it that way.

Attendance, too, is no joke here. Spare notes are no substitute for truly immersing oneself in the essence of the course by being present, and the study culture is such that even the students would pour scorn on the absence of any of their classmates.

It is therefore no surprise that attendance has been 100 per cent among all the students in my intake, save for religious holidays, sick leaves and excruciating circumstances. Such a feat owes itself to the enthusiasm displayed by students in going to every class, as the classes themselves are highly engrossing.

In addition to the continuous salvo of assignments, seminar discussions and interactive lectures, the print and online media students are assigned to specific reporting 'beats' at the Columbia Missourian, the city's multi-award-winning newspaper.

In other words, grad students are handed the task of going out to the public as reporters and coming back with news and feature stories to fill up the next day's paper.

They could either be assigned certain stories, or they could go out and find their own. This hands-on immersion programme is part of the whole masters degree course, and student reporters are not on the newspaper's payroll.

The most amusing reality that the student reporters face here is that there virtually isn't anyone in Columbia who hasn't been approached by a Mizzou reporter at least once. Most of the subject areas that could be covered have already been covered.

The real challenge here is in finding a new "angle" to the story. To be able to find an entirely new story would be considered a great achievement. It is a weekly ritual that star reporters are called down the aisles of the lecture hall to give a brief talk on their articles.

Only this Wednesday I had been rewarded by the Columbia Missourian for my reporting efforts with a front-page treatment to my article on the newly-appointed city administrator of Hallsville, a town 18 kilometres northeast of Columbia.

On a different, non-academic note, I couldn't help but smile after finding out in an international student orientation quiz that my wife's favourite celebrity couple was directly linked with the university.

Hollywood megastar Brad Pitt studied for an undergraduate degree in Journalism here, before he moved on to pursue his mega-bucks acting career.

Mr Pitt was born in Springfield, Missouri, and his family still resides there. The namesake of my scholarship programme, the late Senator J William Fulbright himself was born in Sumner, Missouri.

Another world-renowned name, Joseph Pulitzer, began his lifelong career in journalism in the nearby city of St Louis, after emigrating from Hungary in 1864. It was at Pulitzer's urging that the Missouri School of Journalism was created at the University of Missouri in 1908.

Settling in was a breeze in Columbia, as the international student services staff at the university went out of their way to ensure that I could get accommodation as soon as I landed.

The university student apartment where I am staying right now sits right on the edge of campus, and my lecture halls are just a five-minute bike ride away.

Meanwhile, a mosque approximately the same size as the Kg Kilanas Mosque is situated just two blocks away from the lecture hall. It's great to see members of the Muslim community living comfortably in a city located right in the middle of real America.



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